



SpS-5 THE SELF AND IDENTITY IN INDIAN THOUGHT

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In the human condition, the concept "self" and the matter of "personal identity" are not merely speculative concerns of philosophers, but they have also profound implications to psychological theory and practice. Therefore, self and identity have emerged as central constructs in many behavioural and social sciences. Their major concerns of enquiry is to understand man and his place in the universe and thus, the issues addressed to the area of research are:

1. Awareness of and knowledge about ourselves
 2. Self-evaluation
 3. Self-related motivation and emotions
 4. Self regulation and self efficacy
 5. Self-representation and self-recognition and finally
 6. Self-realization
- All these issues presuppose the notion of self as:
- A. an entity - a physical self
 - B. a set of attitude - a social self
 - C. an organizing principle - a psychological self
 - D. an actor, doer or an executive self and
 - E. The knower self - the witness (Sakshee)

Western Psychologists/Sociologists start their search on self from individualistic point of view. For example, Cooley (1902)¹ defined self as everything that an individual designates of his own and to which the individual refers with the personal pronouns 'I', 'Me' and 'Myself'. Mead (1934)² believed that selves exist only in relation to others. James (1907)³ perhaps was the first Western psychologist who considered 3 dimensions of self: material me, the social me and spiritual me. Later, Rogers (1951)⁴ summarised the concept of self as an organized, fluid but consistent conceptual pattern of perceptions of characteristics and relationships of the 'I' or the 'Me' together with values attached to these concepts.

Indian concept of Self and Identity

The topic of the self in the vedic India has been repeatedly addressed in the indigenous schools by scholars world wide for centuries. The concept of self in Indian thought refers to the relatively more enduring aspects of 'being'. This is not viewed as an abstract principle but an active universal consciousness. The words Tanu - to extend, to spread and 'Atman' are frequently used for self in Rig Veda⁵.

The word 'self' has Sanskrit version as 'Atman' which is derived from Ìan - to breathe; Ìat-to move; Ìva-to blow refers to the essence or principle of life.

The early use of the term 'atman' lacks any mystical or esoteric significance. Rgveda⁶ regards sun as the atman

(essence) of all unanimate and animate things as sun fills the air, earth and heaven.

Later, it is symbolically presented as immanence and transcendence in an individual and cosmos as well. (Shatapath Brahman)⁷. Upanishads further elaborated this concept and these two notions were used in terms of Atman and Brahman, to express single identity. The phrase "Tat twam asi" and 'Aham Brahma asmi synthesizes two notions man's real self (atman) and the cosmic self (Brahma) - the particular to universal or vice-versa. The two aspects may be likened to the individual waves of the ocean; the senses perceive their distinction, the mind their identity⁸.

The self has been conceived as empirical, psychological and transcendental in upanishads and philosophical schools.

In Brahadaranyaka upanishad⁹ self is said to dwell in the heart with physical properties, while chhandogya¹⁰ mentioned it to be the size of a grain of barley or rice. (C.F. Aristotle in his De Anima located - the soul in the heart and Galen in the brain. Descartes imagined the seat of the soul to be the pineal gland). However, this anatomical concept of self did not find any place in subsequent Indian thought and literature.

We may begin with psychological self as the base for all mental and spiritual dimension of self which transcends itself in final analysis and become part of absolute self which is known as 'Brahma' or universal consciousness through the process of its identification with it and therefore self and identity in Indian thought are viewed overlapping in final analysis.

Vaisheshika philosophers asserted that the existence of the Atman or the self can be known by intuitive perception¹¹. While vedantic philosophers view that the existence of the Atman cannot be known by inference or demonstration, nor can it be accepted on the authority of scriptural statements. But the Atman is known to exist intuitively though the notion that every individual person entertains towards his own self. So, a man is conscious of his own self 'I get thinner' 'I perceive this etc. show the existence of self or agent which makes him have such idea¹². Same concepts of self are held by Augustine Descartes and Hegel in West through their study of self consciousness.

However, it is interesting to note that in India, the Atman is generally understood to mean not only the individual self which is understood in west more in terms of individual ego, but also the Brahma or universal self. The Hindu thinkers were inclined to make a big leap in their reasoning. they assume that the existence of the universal self is known directly from the existence of the individual self. Shankara¹³ explained this view in his 'Brahmasutra' commentary that the existence of universal self is known on the ground of its being the Self of everyone. For, everyone is conscious of existence of his self and never thinks 'I am not'. If the existence of the self is not known everything would think 'I am not' so all conscious selves are part of this self. It evolves or the presence of it is known from lower to highest



level. i.e. body-self (Dehamatram), sense-self (indriyani atma) mind-self (man atma), intellect-self (Vijnan atma) pure consciousness (void or Shunya-Atma) ego-self (Aham Karta, Aham Bhokta) etc. So, the existence of the self cannot be denied since, that very person, who might deny it, is the self.

Unlike Western Medical Science Indian Medical Science (Ayurveda) does not exclude self from its curriculum. It considers self as:

1. inner dimension of our nature
2. central point of our being like - the hub of the wheel
3. Thought, feelings, speech, action and relationship all originate here according to Ayurveda
4. It is deep within the personality
5. The whole person and the whole field of interpersonal behaviour can be spontaneously enhanced by the process of self referral or looking within to experience the self.
6. It is reservoir of creativity, intelligence and happiness that spills over into all phases of living life¹⁴.

Searching for self: The birth of Identity

Being is self while becoming is an identity

Being is an organizing function of an individual by means of which one human being relates himself to another. And yet in the experience of

being - as such we experience ourselves as being most ourselves without creating a 'self' that introduces rift into our being. This is 'Identity'. It is a category not of existence but of reflection. That is, it arises only where recognition is involved. The antalogical interest, Of course, is not in identity but in self - the universal entity.

Thus, the proper expression of the fact of the 'identity' is by the term 'same' or identical. Identity is essentially adjective 'Aham Brahma asmi is a central them of discussion and analysis for Indian thought without which no psychological frame of reference can be made to understand man and his behaviour. The concept of identity had existed in Indian civilization for centuries known by Sanskrit term 'Upadhi'. The term refers to any identity that a person or the society levels to, refers to him or her. In the cast organization of Indian society an ideal combination of duty and pleasure, compulsion and freedom was chalked out beautifully called 'Varna - Ashram Vyavastha' identifying a person on his innate and learned cognitive functions (Chaturvyanam maya Srashtam Guna Karm Vivagasha).Gita 4.13)¹⁵

Conclusion:

We have an objective world of plurality; diversity and complexity. However, the convincing truth behind the experiencing of this objective reality is that it is the perennial sense of 'I-ness' or subjectivity which really matters to us. This 'I-ness' is a greater and more direct fact of existence to us than a galaxy of objects presented to it. What is imminent intrinsic and immediate in out experience is our consciousness of self-existence which is understood as an 'identity' In Indian thought self is not understood as superhuman self like Kant's transcendental ego or Hegal's

World Spirit. Such a postulated self - whatever name it may be given is a Pseudo-Self- a self impossible of realization.

Again, the self in Indian thought is never thought an idiosyncrasy, it is not even an entity but a convention to point to the subject character of man as man, but not of man as this or that particular individual with these or those particular traits. If the goal is to be, and if we let self stand for the way it feels to be, there is a hidden premise in this. The determining self must be a possible self. It must represent a set of authentic potentialities of the individual and must be a self whose realization lies within the realm of genuine possibility.

And thus the nature of self is described as essence (Sat), Consciousness (Chit) and Bliss (Ananda).

The self is a process, spontaneous unfolding is real nature of self. In contrast, in industrial society, the experience of self is as a thing. Modern individual defines himself as a thing - as a static element 30 etc. They often conceive themselves as commodities to be packaged and marketed properly. Alienation is a condition in which the self is cut off from its authentic reality and suffer identity loss or identity crises. Need is therefore to revive, understand and practice Indian techniques of self-discipline, self regulation and self realization.

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